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SUBJECT: POST-MODERN YOUTH MOVEMENT USES NEW MEDIA IN  
CAMPAIGN FOR DEMOCRACY

REF: ANKARA 1168

¶1. Summary At a time when most Turkish youth are politically disengaged and apathetic (REF A), the Young Civilians (Genc Siviller) are an important indication of emerging social change, helping to organize recent anti-coup rallies in key cities. The five year old organization, with 2000 members in Yahoo email groups and close to 7500 on the Facebook website, opposes what it characterizes as an "ongoing coup d'etat" by the military and judiciary. The group's leaders describe themselves as "democrats of conscience" who are above the fray of party politics and ideology, although they are undeniably political activists. End Summary.

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Background

¶2. The Young Civilians NGO has come a long way since their first protests in 2003 opposing the annual May 19 Youth and Sports Day holiday as too "Soviet" for modern Turkey. A diverse group of young people, both religious and secular, with a variety of political philosophies, the student-run organization helped organize recent anti-coup rallies, including a July 26 demonstration in Ankara. As for the Ankara event, the group occasionally affiliates with the Common Sense Movement, a pro-democracy campaign generally regarded as nationalist, conservative and religious, although Young Civilians members stress they have their own unique platform: "The only 'common sense' we share is democracy," explained one YC leader.

¶3. Known for its use of humor and irony to leaven potentially subversive comments, the Young Civilians leaders we met told us the group relies heavily on so-called New Media (internet, etc.) to get out their message and attract members. With only about thirty core members, the group's sizable following in online forums reflects the success of this approach. The founders were unable to explain the organization's leadership structure and decision-making processes.

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FEAR, NOT APATHY, KEEPS YOUTH OUT OF POLITICS

¶5. In contrast to the political apathy and disaffection characteristic of most Turkish youth (REF A), the Young Civilian leadership are optimistic about their ability to

affect change and move Turkey away from the "rigid and exclusionary ideologies of the past." The leaders we met with rejected our depiction of Turkish youth as politically apathetic, arguing that most young people are interested in politics but afraid to join political organizations because of the country's history of coups and oppression of opposition groups. Noting their families' opposition to their activism, Young Civilian leaders admitted they are "risking their futures" by their activism, but claimed that, as "democrats of conscience," opposing coups is "an obligation, not a choice."

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BEYOND IDEOLOGY

16. Members described the state's Kemalist ideology as "a dress that has grown too small for Turkey." The Young Civilians consider dialogue the solution, and see value in their organization's ability to bring together people from throughout civil society. The group purposefully uses politically loaded rhetoric borrowed from various ideologies in order, they say, to avoid association with specific and exclusionary social labels and to deconstruct the labels. For instance, in 2007, the Young Civilians ran a campaign for their own fictitious presidential candidate, Aliye Ozturk. Ozturk is a part-Kurdish, part-Armenian Alevi Woman, shown on election posters wearing a traditionally-tied headscarf. In a more recent campaign called "Let's become a little bit Kurdish," the group hosted Kurdish language and culture classes and a celebration in Diyarbakir. "The State can't make people afraid of Kurds and Communists anymore," said one member. "Turkey needs an ideology big enough for 'the

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others'," those Turks who do not subscribe to strict Kemalist orthodoxy. Although the group's emphasis on "dialogue" echoes that of the Islam-based Fethullah Gulen movement, members stressed they have no association with the Gulenist movement.

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"WHAT WE WANT IS REAL POLITICS"

17. The Young Civilian members we spoke with advocated liberal democracy for Turkey. Several voted for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the July 2007, even though they disagree with the party's social and political views. They considered a vote for AKP to be a vote against the military, which interfered in the 2007 presidential election.

One YC leader observed that while the AKP "isn't an ideal democratic party," it had moved Turkey closer to democracy by advancing EU membership and the headscarf issue (which the Young Civilians view as a matter of personal choice). Conversely, members consider the military and judiciary as the embodiment of anti-democratic values. "What the military is protecting are not democratic values, only a specific interpretation of secularism. Democratic values must be protected by a fair and independent judiciary and civil society," According to one YC leader.

18. COMMENT: The Young Civilians represent a progressive strand of pro-democracy thought at a critical time in Turkey's political development. The group's ability to mobilize the country's youth through its use of New Media may be a hopeful sign that Turkish young people may no longer be content to observe politics from the sidelines. The lack of a clear leadership structure may stunt the group's growth and dilute its pro-democracy message in the mix of its diverse online memberships' interests. While the group's ambiguous leadership and decision-making structure may reflect a grassroots advocacy structure, future growth will likely require more structured management. Whether or not the Young Civilians marks the return of Turkey's youth to the political scene, its message of dialogue, debate and a fresh approach is a refreshing addition. END COMMENT

